

April 27, 2004

Honorable Michael K. Powell
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW, Room 8B 201
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Powell,

On behalf of the Deaf Counseling, Advocacy & Referral Agency (DCARA), I am writing to you concerning the urgent need to ensure the quality and stability of Video Relay Service (VRS). DCARA has provided services to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community in Northern California since 1962 and currently provides advocacy, community education, employment services, information and referral service locally, as well as advocating for national issues that affect the rights and opportunities of the larger Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. As such, DCARA is greatly concerned that VRS is not adequately meeting the needs of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, and that the FCC is therefore failing to achieve the standards set for relay services by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

For the millions of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Americans whose primary language is American Sign Language, Video Relay Service provides the most functionally equivalent communications relay service. When the FCC mandated text-based relay services in 1993, the technology to provide a relay service that was visual, and therefore capable of employing ASL, did not exist. In the past few years the technology and the industry needed to provide VRS has become widely available, technically stable, and cost effective. Currently, VRS is used by many Deaf and Hard of Hearing people for employment, to receive services from businesses and government agencies, and to fully participate in our society.

Although VRS is currently a reimbursable relay service, it is not a mandated service. Therefore, it is not required to be a continuous service (24 hours a day, 7 days a week), nor it is required to meet certain technology quality requirements, such as immediate response time (e.g., 85% of calls answered within 20 seconds). Without a mandate, VRS, the most functionally equivalent relay service achievable at this time for those with ASL fluency, will remain substandard. Additionally, as a mandated service, VRS provider reimbursement rates would support the high quality interpreters needed to make VRS an effective communications system. DCARA requests that the FCC mandate VRS immediately, in order to ensure that both interstate and intrastate relay communications will meet the goal of functional equivalency required by the ADA.

Sincerely,

Robert I. Roth, M.A.
Chief Executive Officer